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SUBJECT: PAN DEPUTIES DENOUNCE BORDER FENCE PROPOSAL

¶1. (SBU) Summary: On February 8, ten members of the National Action Party's (PAN) faction in the Chamber of Deputies met with poloffs to voice their strong opposition to the provision of H.R. 4437 calling for the extension of the fence that now exists along portions of the U.S.-Mexican border. The deputies delivered a letter asking the Ambassador to convey to the USG their opposition. Following the meeting, the deputies spoke to the assembled press outside the embassy, which was reported in the February 9 editions of several newspapers. With Mexico in the midst of a highly competitive general election campaign, there is no doubt that the deputies were motivated in part by domestic political considerations, and it is a safe bet that during the heat of the campaign, U.S. immigration policy will remain a politically convenient target. On the other hand, the deputies emphasized to us that their opposition was deeply rooted and principled, and that they felt compelled to speak out given the strong views of their constituents on this issue. Although we believe our discussion with the deputies left them with a better understanding of the U.S. position, the border fence remains a highly emotional issue here. On February 9 the group announced they would conduct a 24-hour vigil and fast in Tijuana. End summary.

¶2. (SBU) On February 8, and at their request, 10 PAN deputies met with poloffs to express their strong opposition to the provisions in H.R. 4437 calling for the extension of the border fence, and the criminalization of an alien's undocumented presence in the United States. During the meeting, the deputies delivered a letter conveying their "most energetic rejection" of the fence proposal, arguing that policy decisions affecting life in the border region should be "adopted in a framework of respect (and) cooperation...and to the extent possible by consensus." The letter argued that a border "wall" would violate Mexicans' freedom of movement, and conflicts with the trend towards increased U.S.-Mexico commercial, cultural and social integration. In the letter, the deputies requested that the Ambassador convey their views to the U.S. executive and legislative branches. The Ambassador has answered the letter, underscoring the need for improved border security and the President's commitment to a temporary worker program and challenging the assertion that the U.S. is planning to close its border with Mexico.

¶3. (SBU) During the meeting, the deputies -- nearly all of whom represented border states or states that have witnessed heavy emigration to the United States -- emphasized that they sought an open and respectful discussion of the issue. They said that they greatly valued close U.S.-Mexican relations and hoped to see even further cooperation in the future. They recognized that poor economic conditions in Mexico were the major factor contributing to illegal immigration, adding that the GOM was seeking to implement structural reforms that would create more economic opportunities in Mexico and deter further migration. Noting the trend towards leftist, anti-American governments in Latin America, Deputy Jose Osuša

of Baja California warned that construction of the fence could foment anti-Americanism in Mexico and help elect left-wing presidential candidate Andres Manuel Lopez Obrador.

¶4. (SBU) While the meeting was conducted in a respectful, even friendly atmosphere, it revealed that even well-informed lawmakers shared some of the public's misperceptions about the fence proposal, particularly that it would somehow limit lawful border crossings. Speaking with obvious emotion in her voice, Deputy Maki Esther Ortiz Dominguez noted that in her home state of Tamaulipas, numerous Mexicans had close relatives across the border, who they were accustomed to visiting regularly. She argued that the proposed border fence would divide families.

¶5. (SBU) Responding to the deputies' comments, POL Minister-Counselor recognized that the U.S.-Mexican border region had a unique dynamic, with numerous human and economic ties linking the two sides of the border. She explained that many Americans perceived that the border was out of control, that immigration had become a major domestic political issue, and that there was strong public support for taking measures necessary to restore order on the border. She noted that in the aftermath of 9/11, the lack of adequate border controls threatened U.S. national security. She clarified that the fence proposal, if adopted, would have no effect on lawful border crossings and that in fact, the USG sought to streamline procedures for lawful border crossings. Poloff urged the deputies to keep in mind that the fence proposal was part of a comprehensive immigration reform package in which the President sought to include a temporary worker program. He added that given political realities in the U.S., the President's temporary worker program -- which would

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benefit millions of Mexicans on both sides of the border -- stood little chance of success unless it were part of a broader package that included enhanced border security. Poloff also explained the tremendous social and economic costs that undocumented aliens pose for U.S. border states and communities. While leaving the meeting, one of the deputies remarked that our explanation of the context surrounding H.R. 4437 provided information that he was not previously aware of and helped him to better understand the U.S. position.

¶6. (SBU) Following the meeting, the deputies spoke to about a dozen journalists outside the embassy. The deputies announced that they planned to conduct public protests against the fence; we understand that the first of these may be scheduled for February 10.

¶7. (SBU) Comment: Election year politics undoubtedly were an important factor underlying the PAN deputies' initiative. It may be that as the PAN is widely viewed as by far the most pro-U.S. of Mexico's political parties, the deputies felt they had to prove their bona fides on the immigration issue. Nevertheless, their initiative also reflects the very deep -- even visceral -- public opposition here to the proposed border fence. It serves as a reminder that Americans and Mexicans perceive the proposal in strikingly different terms. Whereas Americans see the fence as a logical and justified response to an uncontrolled tide of illegal border crossings, Mexicans see a national affront, as well as a violation of a perceived fundamental right to migrate at will across international borders. Bridging this yawning gap in perceptions will remain a major focus of our outreach efforts. End comment.

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